

# Children's Games as Mechanisms for Easing Ethnic Interaction in Ethnically Heterogeneous Communities — A Nigerian Case

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Yauri Emirate (Division), North-Western State, Nigeria, (population 100,000) is an ethnically heterogeneous community. Traditionally the Hausa have formed a ruling elite, while the Gungawa, Dukawa, Shangawa, and Kamberi have been subordinate to them. While each community is ethnically separate from each of the others and culturally distinct from them, there is intensive and ethnic interaction among them, ranging from actions that result in ethnic change to those involving paying taxes to a common government. Recent changes in the government have increased the ethnic mix in Yauri, and the chances for ethnic problems. A number of commonly shared values and activities is necessary to alleviate the friction that may arise in situations of contact of ethnically heterogeneous peoples. This paper explores the role that games common to all ethnic groups in Yauri perform in easing interethnic contact. Games peculiar to one or two groups are mentioned to demonstrate the contrast between boundary maintaining and boundary permeating activities. Finally, joking relationships (relationships of privileged familiarity) between ethnic groups are discussed briefly as mechanisms for dividing one block of ethnic groups against others. Throughout, play is seen as conveying a cultural message while aiding in the articulation of social relationships.

Properly speaking consideration of children's games belongs to the broader category of play. In that category there is a wide range of human activity too long studied in isolation: jokes, relations of privileged familiarity, riddles, puns, sporting events, *etc.* Some areas now considered part of play were at best until recently only peripheral or esoteric interests of the anthropologist. For whatever reason, this regrettable neglect now seems to be at an end. A number of recent articles (Handleman 1974; Bateson 1972; Miller 1973, and others) attest to the lively interest in the subject among anthropologists.

This paper focuses on one theoretical issue: the relationship between children's games and what Goffman (1959) has termed the front and back stage areas of social interaction. In particular, it looks at children's games as mechanisms for socialization and in that respect offers some methodological suggestions regarding the study of cultural imprinting of patterns. Games clearly reflect underlying cultural patterns and prepare children, including adolescents, for proper interaction in the "real" world beyond games. Thus, there may be games common to members of all ethnic groups in a heterogeneous area while at the same time there may be games reserved for members of a given ethnic group. The sharing of common cognitive patterns found in games known and played by all, facilitates ethnic interaction while the reservation of certain games "for members only" emphasizes ethnic uniqueness. In brief, both ethnic cooperation and separateness are needed in interaction fields where ethnicity forms the primary basis of intergroup interaction. Therefore, mechanisms for preserving and transcending ethnic identity are vital to the efficient

functioning of the system. Among these mechanisms are children's games which control the area of play reality and thus clearly manipulate appropriate variables in order to convey certain underlying patterns for interaction to the participants. These variables include rules, players, occasion, duration, location, and nature of the game. A careful study of children's games promises significant theoretical and methodological rewards for anthropology.